Chapter 19

Anchorage and Vicinity – 1967 Version

Before I left Oklahoma I had a telephone call from a lady in Alaska – the Travel Clerk for the Alaska District – who advised me that she and her husband were traveling to the lower 48 for an extended vacation, and would I mind "living" in their house in Anchorage until they returned. Now I hate to turn loose of a dollar as much as anyone, so I gladly accepted their invitation. There was "lots" of trouble shooting that the Alaska District had in mind for me, but they would cooperate and adjust their schedule to allow me to "house- sit" for this period. This was great for me also.

I was met at the airport by John Reynolds who had the key to the house for me. He graciously got the oil furnace going for me, and said he would pick me up for work, deliver me home in the afternoons, and generally see that all my needs were met while living there.

Back at the District Office, Marty Davoren was now a permanent employee of the Alaska District, a section head in the Supply Division. Floyd Akin was still there, now heading up the Warehouse, and controlling all the government furnished property for the district. A Mr. Camy (I believed I have spelled that correctly) who was the Resident Engineer in charge of contructing the Keystone Dam on the Arkansas River just west of Tulsa, was now the Chief of the Construction Division of the Alaska District.

So you can see I was among friends. But, I'm sure you would like me to get on with my story.

During the period of reconstruction after the earthquake, many buildings had to be rebuilt. Each of these buildings, roads, etc., were government property, and had to be properly transferred to the Agency they were built for. You are aware this was some three years after the earthquake, and many of the items had been completed for two years or more. It seems that because of the heavy workload created by the earthquake, the Chief of Engineers in Washington, D.C. had granted extensions for effecting these transfers, but now was telling the District Engineer and Division Engineer (the next step up), that it was now time for action.

They found me a desk somewhere and moved me into an office with their Office Engineer. It seems the chore of transferring this property had been among his duties, only he had been unable to obtain a "cost" for each item from the Finance and Accounting Branch. I'm not sure how long this deadlock had been going on, but the Office Engineer gave me a pile of files and correspondence with his condolences, stating he didn't think I could do it.

I had never accomplished the property transfer like this in my life, but I assumed that if the Chief of Engineers in Washington, D.C. wanted this done, then the least I could do was somehow just do it.

I dug into the files and saw correspondence requesting the necessary cost figures covering a period of months or even years – some of it had never even been answered. Now in all fairness, I must say the Finance and Accounting Branch is one of the busiest branches in every office I've ever been associated with. So don't let me imply that they were not doing their job – they were – and had been working six or seven days a week, sometimes long hours each day, ever since the earthquake.

None the less, the Chief of Engineers wanted this done so I must figure out a way of extracting the figures I needed from that Branch. I couldn't go into their records (this was before computers), so how could this be done. Writing hadn't accomplished it, so I must approach this another way. Let me state that I didn't know anyone in the branch, so I couldn't use the buddy buddy system either.

Enough of this. I merely started showing up in the Chief of the Finance and Accounting Branch's office at about 9:00 every morning. I was not received too well the first dozen or so times – then, she would start laughing every time I came. She finally arrived at the point of saying she would have it done – but not when.

You could set your watch every morning by my trip to the other end of the building. One morning she figured out that I was not going away, so she called one of her employees in and told him he was relieved from all his duties until he had assembled *all* the cost data I needed to accomplish the property transfers. He was to work overtime as he felt able to do it, but he wasn't even to answer the phone calls about his other work until this was all completed.

Within two weeks all the property had been transferred and I assumed everyone was happy – even the Chief of Engineers. From that time on I became known as the person to clean up the impossible, and as you will note in the rest of this book, I was given several assignments in that capacity.

During this period, I was searched out as a prospect to purchase a vehicle – a Ford Falcon station wagon. It seemed to be in good shape – looked nice, and ran good, so I bought it. This relieved my fellow employees from having to take care of me, and I could get to work on my own. I later sold it, and the boy who bought it drove it down the Alaska highway to the lower 48, and on the way back to Anchorage it broke down and left his family stranded. I was sorry this happened, but I don't think I would have had the nerve to start off on a trip such as this in this car.

Having obtained some "wheels" I became more mobile. I wanted to see some of the places I had heard about, or looked down on from flying over them. I also wanted to go back to Portage Glacier again – I was really fascinated with it.

The first Saturday I had off I went sightseeing. First stop, Portage Glacier, then on to new places. Portage Glacier was just as nice as I had remembered it. I had the bright idea I just might walk across to the leading edge of it and see it up close. From another parking lot it

didn't seem like such a bad idea so off I went.

My first encounter was with brush – I mean brush so thick it could barely be penetrated. I eventually worked my way through it, then there were streams – fast moving – falling all the way from the tops of the mountains. I was able to cross them by jumping from rock to rock without falling, and my combat boots were almost waterproof.

Finally I came to a mountain that protruded out of the lake, at an angle I was not sure I could hang on to. Having come this far (about two-thirds of the distance to the glacier), my "good sense" compelled me to turn back. I retraced – almost – the way I had come, only I wound up a long way from where I had started. I admitted defeat – found my car and headed for Kenai.

The community of Kenai is located on the banks of the Cook Inlet which has a perpendicular bluff several hundred feet high. It resembles the White Cliffs of Dover in England – only these aren't white. Off the shore of Kenai are several oil rigs which were there long before the development of the north slope oil fields in the Point Barrow area.

I didn't see too much of the town, but I did find a place where I could walk to the bluffs. I wouldn't get too close to the edge, but looking down I thought I was in an airplane.

Returning to Anchorage, I passed an area where lightning had started a forest fire some time in the past, covering several square miles. New growth had begun, but the scars the fire produced would be years and years looking normal again. This was "hill" country but very broken. It would be extremely difficult to walk cross country. A range of fairly tall mountains were to the north of these hills toward Anchorage.

Before I leave this area, let me relate a story I was told by a small plane owner. He stated he was in this area, running late on returning to Anchorage. The weather was cloudy – the tops of the mountains were clouded over. He said he was very familiar with flying in this area, and decided he would go ahead and fly over the tops of the mountains, even though he had no instruments on his plane for "blind" flying – something he knew he should never do.

Up in the clouds he flew timing himself to fly in the compass setting for Anchorage until he felt comfortable that he was past the mountains. He started his descent having covered what he believed to be sufficient distance to clear the mountains bringing him in line with the airport but when he broke through the clouds, he was heading straight toward the face of a mountain – much too close to comfort. He banked and circled, to find he was surrounded on every side by mountains. He had descended into an area with no way out, except up – with not much room for circling to attain the altitude he needed. He indicated that without his knowledge he had encountered a strong head wind, which had almost cost him his life.

Since he was telling me this story, you must suspect that he made it. When he got to the proper altitude that he knew would clear all the mountains in the area, he headed due west – to the Cook Inlet – the way he should have gone to begin with. His learning cycle from this incident led him to make the statement that *he would never fly into clouds again.*

My next trip was to Seward. You probably remember the pictures shown of Seward after the earthquake. The most noted incident was one of an Alaska Railway locomotive being carried ten blocks by the tsunami. The port was completely destroyed and parts of the docks and boats were found more than a mile from the water.

Seward is backed up against rugged mountains – the town being located in a small cove area directly at their base. Many of the Alaska towns are located this same way seemingly just hanging on the sides of mountains. The town seemed to be pretty well rebuilt by the time I got to see it.

I had wanted to go to Homer on another trip but I never had the opportunity to make it.

Anchorage had mostly recovered from the earthquake. Streets had been repaired, most of the wrecked buildings had been torn down with the ground leveled or new buildings in their places. The J.C. Penney Company had a nice new modern store downtown – the First Baptist Church was now in a new rock building on 10th Street, facing Park Strip.

The Park had been rebuilt, the tennis courts were now on one level and kids were playing

soccer and other games up and down its length.

Fourth Avenue was rebuilt and paved again, although a long stretch of the north side was sloped down the hill and would probably never hold buildings again. Farther on down, the Mt. McKinley apartment building still stood just as it was when I first saw it — the same big holes in its sides, empty — a reminder that a tragedy had happened sometime in the past.

The crack in the floor of the Alaska District Office where I sat some three years earlier, was still there.

One afternoon after work I went home to my adopted house to find its owners sitting in *their* living room. Fortunately, I hadn't left the place in a mess, as I had tried to keep my dishes washed and generally clean up things — somewhat. Although they asked me to stay on, I declined, packed my few belongings and headed for the BOQ again.

My benefactor's return was what the Chief of Construction Division had been waiting for.